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MISCELLANY

THE BEGINNINGS OF IRISH CATHOLIC JOURNALISM IN AMERICA

By Rev. Dr. Paul J. Foik, C.S.C.

The period that ushered in the French Revolution wrought many changes in the condition of Europe, but nowhere, except in France itself, were institutions so modified, and modes of thought so affected, as in the British dominions. England had just passed through one of the severest conflicts of her history—the Seven Years' War. Hardly had her guns ceased their thunders in this contest when her American colonies revolted and carried their struggle for liberty to a successful issue. The mother-country was still bewailing the misfortune which the egregious folly of her misrule had brought about, when the tumultuous chaos of the great Napoleonic wars, like another deluge, spread destruction and desolation upon a world already sickened with a thousand woes. The waves of enmity and discontent rose high and swept across the whole of Europe. No country on the Continent stood unshaken by the blows of that bitter conflict. Far and wide, swift as the cannon's shot, proceeded the cry of liberty—prophetic sound!—that made kings tremble on their thrones and awoke within the hearts of men a new and strange enthusiasm. This flood had not yet abated its fury when Ireland, still burdened with the chains of English oppression, attempted to tear from her the trammels of a wicked system based on royal prerogative.

The soul of this movement was the Society of United Irishmen founded in 1791. Its primitive idea was to unite the Catholics and Protestants to bring about a much needed parliamentary reform for Ireland, and to improve its system of government.¹

As early as 1792 the Society warned the Government of England against a continuance of its abuses, and threatened that, unless reforms were forthcoming, the people would soon be driven to embrace republicanism. The great minds of Ireland, at last thoroughly aroused, sought objects on which to employ their energies. Their thoughts were directed towards every means that would speedily alleviate the hardships and sufferings of their fellow-countrymen. Then was born that intellectual activity and moral earnestness which was to stir the souls of all true Irishmen, not only in their native land but also in that of their adoption—the United States of America.

This movement made itself forcibly felt through the medium of the press. The chief organs of the United Irishmen were the *Northern*

¹ *History of Irish Periodical Literature*, by Robert R. Madden. London: T. C. Newby, 1867, Vol. ii, p. 235.

*Star*² and the *Dublin Press*³ both established in the nineties. The chief editor of the *Northern Star* was Samuel Neilson.⁴ With him were associated eleven others, of whom the greater number were in the course of a few years counted among New York's foremost citizens.

Dr. Madden states that "the grand object of these papers seems to have been to keep the example and events of the French Revolution constantly before the eyes of the people."⁵ The *Dublin Press*, during its brief existence, had many able contributors. Men of so wide literary reputation as Thomas Moore were writers for this paper. He, however, did not contribute matter of any particular moment. Among these men of letters were persons who soon afterwards became prominent in the early history of New York City. The "Montanus" Letters of Thomas Addis Emmett, written in the *Press*, excited the most attention. William Sampson, another of New York's citizens, wrote over the pen-name "Fortesque." Dr. MacNeven, their companion in exile, was also a man of considerable culture.⁶

While these Irish patriots were still in the midst of their struggles for liberty in the Emerald Isle, branches of the Society were being formed in America. We see traces of these activities as early as 1794. Mathew Carey, William Duane and others assisted the efforts of the parent society by their fearless advocacy of its doctrines, and that in the face of a Federalist opposition which was at that time beginning to manifest itself.⁷ Reprints of the principal articles in the *Press* were published from the office of the *Aurora*, the mouthpiece of the Jeffersonian party.⁸ The headquarters of the American branch of the United Irishmen gave aid and impulse to their friends across the sea, supplying them with funds—and arms were even promised should necessity demand such assistance.⁹

² *History of Irish Periodical Literature*, by R. R. Madden. London: T. C. Newby, 1867, Vol. ii, pp. 225-235.

³ *Lives and Times of the United Irishman*, by R. R. Madden. London: J. Madden & Co., 1843, Vol. ii, Series 2, pp. 294-304.

⁴ Samuel Neilson became an Irish exile in America and settled at Poughkeepsie, N. Y. See *History of Irish Periodical Literature* as cited above.

⁵ *History of Irish Periodical Literature*, cited above, Vol. ii, p. 233.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. ii. Also *Lives and Times of the United Irishmen*, Vol. ii, Series 2, under their respective names. See also biography of Arthur O'Connor for details, regarding the *Press* in Vol. ii, Series 2. Also see *Ninety-eight and Forty-eight*, by A. S. New York: 1856, pp. 203-4.

⁷ *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, Vol. iv, p. 69. Boston, 1904. Article by Edward O'Meaher Condon on *Irish Immigration to the United States since 1790*. Reprint from the *Pilot*, Boston, Mass.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89. Also *Ninety-eight and Forty-eight*. See footnote, p. 205.

⁹ *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, cited above.

The English Government looked with some apprehension on the strength and influence wielded by this sympathetic organization in America, and Sir Robert Lister, then Minister to the United States, set to work systematically to check, if possible, this concerted movement made by the members and friends of the Society in America.¹⁰

Sir Robert's efforts were, unfortunately, only too successful. He was on terms of closest intimacy with some of the highest officials in the American Government, and persuaded them that the presence of these Irish enthusiasts was a menace to American institutions and liberty.¹¹ The psychological moment arrived when the rebellion broke out in Ireland in 1798. Under pretense of danger from the Society of United Irishmen and their sympathizers in this country, President Adams took occasion to address a message to Congress, impressing members with the necessity of passing some suitable legislation relative to the admission of foreigners to the country and their residence here.¹² By the passage of this Alien Law a dangerous autocracy was established. Foreigners remained in the country at the mercy of the President. If they earned his displeasure, or if they were regarded as "dangerous," they might be compelled to undergo a term of imprisonment, to suffer perpetual disqualification from the rights of citizenship, or be obliged in the end to quit the country. At best they were merely tolerated, since fourteen years must elapse before they received the full rights of citizenship.¹³

As might naturally be expected, the opposition press, controlled principally by Irishmen,¹⁴ challenged the President's action and criticized the Alien Law with a just severity. But Mr. Adams was not to be daunted. He succeeded in influencing Congress to pass a law which would make it a seditious libel to reflect on the conduct of the chief executive or to question the motives of Congress.

When the English Minister heard of the passage of the law, his joy knew no bounds. In a letter written in 1799 to the Governor-General

¹⁰ *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, cited above.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹² *The Irish in America*, by Edward O'Meagher Condon, p. 259.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 259. Also *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, cited above, p. 89.

¹⁴ *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, Vol. iii, p. 63. Article on "Men of Irish Blood Who Have Attained Distinction in American Journalism," by Michael Edmund Hennessy, of the staff of the *Boston Daily Globe*. Matthew Lyon was the first to suffer under the Sedition Law. By a strange irony of fate Adams was defeated by the vote of Lyon when up for reelection against Jefferson. John Daly Burke was another man on whom Adams kept a sharp eye, intending to give him to British authorities. Aaron Burr, knowing this, aided Burke to escape. See *Journal* cited above, Vol. iii, p. 62 *et seq.*

of Canada, he related that some of the Federalists had "taken the law in their own hands and flogged one or two printers of the newspapers whose comments had offended them"; he told how this conduct "had given rise to much animosity, to threats, and to a commencing of armed associations among those opposed to the laws, particularly among the United Irishmen." "Some apprehended," he added, "that the affair may lead to civil war."¹⁵

This unjust attack on the liberty of Irish immigrants was also carried on with even greater malevolence at the seat of government in England. In this persecution, Rufus King, the American Minister at the Court of St. James, was to play a conspicuous part. The failure of the Irish Rebellion in 1798 led to the imprisonment of many of the leaders of the Society of the United Irishmen. In the latter part of that year, however, Thomas Addis Emmett, acting as a spokesman for his compatriots, obtained from the British Government a promise of perfect freedom¹⁶ for them on condition that they would immediately quit English territory, never to return. They applied to the American Minister for passports to the United States—but Mr. King, in accordance with the wishes and sympathies of President Adams, refused to grant their request. Mr. Marsden, the Under Secretary of State, informed the prisoners, then confined in Fort George, Scotland, that Mr. King had remonstrated with the British authorities and bitterly opposed the emigration of these unsuccessful patriots to America. When asked by them why Mr. King hindered their departure to the United States, the Under Secretary evasively replied: "Perhaps Mr. King does not desire to have republicans in America." This refusal on the part of Mr. King to assist the Irish state prisoners gave a pretext to the government of Great Britain to detain them four years longer in confinement.¹⁷

At last the day of their deliverance came. About 1804 or thereabouts, the released patriots landed in America. Shortly after their arrival these exiles learned, with feelings of pain, the monstrous misrepresentations to which the majority of Irishmen were subjected. The

¹⁵ *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, Vol. iv, pp. 89-90.

¹⁶ The text of this treaty and its history, written by Dr. MacNeven, may be found in *Pieces of Irish History, Illustrative of the Conditions of the Catholics in Ireland, of the Origin and Progress of the Political System of the United Irishmen and of their Transactions with the Anglo-Irish Government*, published by W. J. MacNeven. New York: Bernard Dornin, 1807, p. 169 *et seq.*

¹⁷ *The Irish in America*, by Edward O'Meagher Condon, pp. 260-61. See also *Letter of Rufus King to Henry Jackson, Esq.*, also *Letters of Thomas Addis Emmett to Rufus King*. (These may be found in *Pieces of Irish History, etc.*, cited above, pp. 281, etc. These letters may also be found in the files of the *Shamrock* for 1816, starting about March).

influence exercised against them by a hostile press was enormous; added to this were the bitter prejudices of the Puritanical Federalists, who scorned these foreigners as "bog-trotters" and "wild Irishmen."¹⁸ Dr. MacNeven, writing shortly after his arrival in New York City, does not exaggerate the condition of affairs existing in this country when he states that "the same virulence and invective, the same violation of truth, the same distortion of fact, that marked the conduct of the English faction towards the United Irishmen in Europe, have been revived against them here by the retainers and hirelings of the same enemy."¹⁹

Self-protection, the bond that united Irish in Ireland in '98, now united these exiles and their sympathizers in America. The latter union was, however, a peaceful one, and consisted in the formation of such associations as the Juvenile Sons of Erin, Friends of Ireland, St. Patrick Benevolent Societies, and the like. The principal and very often the only local news items of the early Irish Catholic periodicals were the addresses and proceedings of such organizations. The purpose of these associations was, in some measure, the promoting of the external interests of Irishmen, especially the neutralization of existing prejudices sown broadcast by an unfriendly press, not only in America, but also in Europe. Hence it became necessary to encourage the formation of Irish periodicals in which the affairs of that nation might be truthfully stated. That need was to be met by Irish Catholic weeklies published principally in the two great centers of population, New York and Philadelphia.

¹⁸ *The Irish Scots and the "Scotch-Irish,"* by Hon. John C. Linehan, p. 72.

¹⁹ *Pieces of Irish History, etc.* Introduction by W. J. MacNeven, cited above.